

# Missouri River plan may not offer alternative for controlling flow

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After years of research and anticipation, federal officials are about to release a plan on managing the Missouri River that may recommend nothing.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' plan, set to go to a printer this week, may not offer a "preferred alternative" for controlling the river's flow, corps officials said Wednesday.

"There certainly is a chance of that happening, a real chance of that," said Paul Johnston, a corps spokesman in Omaha.

U.S. Sen. Kit Bond, a Missouri Republican, has ardently opposed altering the river's flow, saying changes would hurt Missouri's barge and agriculture industries.

Environmental groups on Wednesday were incensed at the news.

"That's government at its worst," said Chad Smith of American Rivers, a national river conservancy group. "It's representative of no one being all they can be."

"After 12 years and millions of dollars not even trying to come up with a decision is really shocking."

The corps has been studying how to change the river's flow after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service called for changes to protect three endangered species -- two birds and a prehistoric fish.

The service recommended changing dam operations to allow the river to rise at least once every spring and fall in summer. In that way, it might mimic a more natural flow, with wetlands in the spring and sandbars in the summer, and might help the endangered species.

Such a change would put the corps in compliance with the federal Endangered Species Act, the wildlife service said. But the plan also has angered downstream users. Some of Missouri's farmers worry about flooding, and the barge industry says it cannot operate if summer water levels drop.

In 1994, the corps issued a "preferred alternative" in its first attempt to revise the manual controlling the river's flow. But because of opposition, it later pulled that recommendation and announced it would start over.

As recently as late last month, corps officials had said they would satisfy the flow changes recommended by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The corps' thick environmental impact statement was scheduled to go to a printer so

it would be available by the end of August. Whether it contains any recommendation is "the question of the day and the question of the decade," said Richard Opper, executive director of the Missouri River Basin Association, an umbrella group of states along the Missouri.

Opper and others involved in the Missouri River negotiations said they heard that the report may not contain a "preferred alternative."

"That would be troubling just because of the unknown," said Diane Katzenberger, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Denver.

Not issuing a preferred plan now would not preclude the agency from choosing later, after all the alternatives are discussed further, said the corps' Johnston.